Arthur Coleman hasn't Lost His Art

By Ginnie Beardsley

'SERMONS in STONES'

STONE, the building material which never ages, has played its part in the construction of a big percentage of the world's most interesting buildings. One may see examples in Victoria, ranging from very early architectural styles to the most modern, where stone is used for contrast with wood, glass, and stucco.

A stone mason whose work has spanned the years, to cover the cathedrals of his native England, the University of Saskatchewan buildings in Saskatoon, and some very recent architectural landmarks in Victoria, is Arthur Coleman. By the bitter irony of fate, Mr. Coleman, who has created so much of beauty for others, lives in a housekeeping room, having lost his own stone house in a mortgage foreclosure in the 'thirties.

Qualified both as stone mason and bricklayer in England, Mr. Coleman landed in an Ottawa, which was going through a period when ads included the words "No Englishman need apply." As soon as his savings arrived, he came west, working on the building of a couple of banks in Winnipeg, and taking part in the construction of some of the buildings on Saskatchewan University's very beautiful campus.

By the time he reached Victoria, Mr. Coleman had resolved to stick to the easier portion of his trade: bricklaying. However, this resolve came to an end when he went to work for the firm of a friend from home, Albert Parfitt. When Parfitt Brothers bid successfully for the contract to do part of the work on Christ Church Cathedral, Arthur Coleman was right there, as a stone mason, in 1926.

It was in the 'twenties that Mr. Coleman started work on his own stone home, built on a farm through which he walked and tore his clothes on brambles the very first Sunday he spent in Victoria. A Mr. Creed pastured his cows on the property where Cook Street now passes perhaps a shade too close in front of the solid granite house with the red brick trim. Mr. Coleman remembers, too, how the wild geese used to stop to rest on his land in the years when he was both building on and living in the Cook Street house.

CUT TO THE GRAIN

Granite was not too hard to come by. Some of that for the house came from directly across the road, some from the road allowance itself. Mr. Coleman remembers one giant boulder which he estimates provided some 21,600 pounds of stone when split. The splitting took an entire day (The first splitting, that is!) The boulder had to be drilled correctly, according to the grain, in 16 places before it would split cleanly in two. This business of grain is very important, and is something an experienced stone mason tells by touch. The expression "going against the grain" can be taken to mean a courting of disaster in the parlance of more than one trade.

Money, another problem, and with a growing family, Mr. Coleman found the going slow in saving. Building his house while he lived in it, in unfinished condition, was awkward.

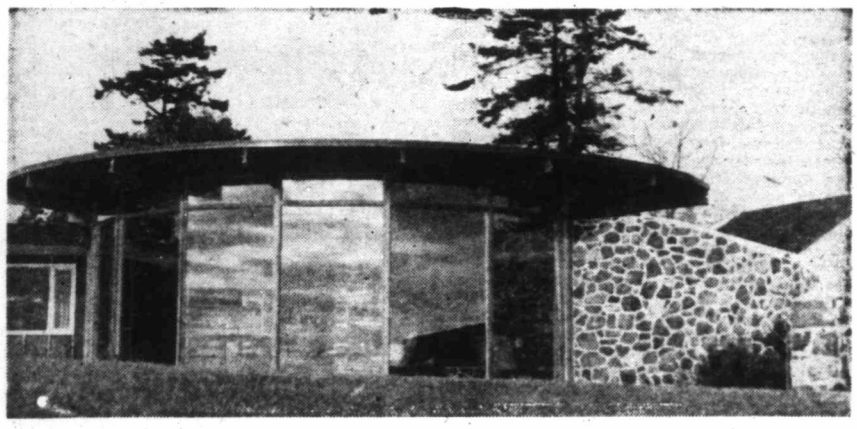
Finally, "I made the biggest mistake of my life," says Mr. Coleman. "I borrowed money to finish the house, but it finished me instead."

With 8 per cent interest to pay, and taxes and other expenses increasing, the family was evicted by court order in 1931.

For more than 20 years a succession of casual renters moved in, and moved out again, careless of the house and unappreciative of the work which had gone into the building of it. Cook Street was widened to give increased access to expanding Saanich, and many people passed the stone house, noticed it as a landmark, but thought no more about it.

One couple, however, Mr. and Mrs. A. G. Hemmig, drove by and looked with longing. For six years they admired the neat granite structure in its increasingly untidy surroundings, and said, "Wouldn't it be wonderful to live there some day!"

The day came. A newspaper advertisement said, "Auction. Stone house 'Oak Crest,' 3149 Cook Street."



The illustrations show contrast in the mason's craft. Above, the Arthur Coleman home he loved and lost. Below, the Robert Dunsmuir residence whose lovely lines his hands wrought.

"Let's go," said Mrs. Hemmig. So the couple, without any real hope they would be able to buy the house, joined others on the grass, listened to the auctioneer's voice, to the few, surprisingly low bids, and before the afternoon was over, found themselves in possession.

To say they were thrilled would be the weakest of understatements. True, they had bought a lot of work, as well as a solid asset. Twenty years of negligent occupancy had done the inside no good, and the outside had mostly been completely ignored. The kitchen was a hideous hodge-podge of colors, looking as if two people had started to decorate it from opposite ends, with opposite ideas. Plaster repairs, new paint work, cupboards, and a closed-in stairway to allow the Hemmigs to rent the upstairs as a separate suite, all took time. And bringing back the garden is still taking time, but the Hemmigs don't grudge a minute of it.

One thing only needed no work: the fine stonework, carefully mortared and "pointed," was as solid and handsome as when Mr. Coleman had built the house. Three fine fireplaces give pleasure, but are seldom needed for heat, says Mrs. Hemmig. Planning is helping to screen the encroaching road, and the Hemmigs are approaching the day when everything about the house will live up to the dignity and charm of the exterior.

To Mr. Coleman, the sale of the house can have made little difference. The 20-odd years since he left it have seen his family grown up and himself widowed. Many people's homes and other buildings, too, have benefited from his skill with brick and stone. The Embassy Court Motel, and two modern houses using colored stone in contrast to stucco in the Uplands district are Coleman masonry.

One of the most interesting of Mr. Coleman's more recent jobs was on Sea View Drive, where, like many a Victoria stone mason before him, he worked for a member of the Dunsmuir family. The Di Castri designed home successfully takes up the challenge of a narrow promontory of land (only 20 feet across at one point), and spirals like the shell of the chambered nautilus to take best advantage of the views and sunlight. Robert, great grandson and namesake of the original castle-building Dunsmiur, helped the stone mason by wheeling rocks down the driveway and up a ramp as the walls rose. Stone (blasted from the property) forms one complete curved wall of the living room, and is continued outside in a flange to complete the shape. The fireplace and the wall adjacent to it are also of stone. Wood and glass comprise the rest of the unusual bungalow, which reverses conventional structure by pitching the roof towards the centre of the building, where a down drain goes through the middle of the house. All rooms radiate around the centre, and are segments of a circle.

Certainly, it was a far cry from the traditional buildings of his homeland to this unusual Victoria house, but Arthur Coleman evidently enjoyed it, for, according to Mr. Dunsmuir, he sang as he worked, and proved himself as adaptable as the material in which he specializes.